

Opinion **African economy**

Pandemic gives Africa a chance to free itself from aid dependency

Unequal access to vaccines reflects an imbalance in global power that must be corrected

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The first Nigerian to receive a Covid-19 vaccine, in March. The EU has joined the US in backing vaccine production in Africa, which would place the continent firmly on the road to self-sufficiency as regards health security © Kola Sulaimon/AFP/Getty Images

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The author is co-chair of the Africa Vaccine Delivery Alliance and former chief humanitarian co-ordinator for Nigeria

In my world, Covid-19 is the place where [public health](#), infectious diseases and humanitarian crises collide. It's as though all the past training from medical school, through to the humanitarian emergencies I've worked in from Haiti and Rwanda to north-east Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region, were a preparation for the complexities and multifaceted challenge of this moment in history. Government denialism, multilateral chicanery and diplomatic quagmires are all part of this.

The US government's support for intellectual property waivers has [opened up possibilities](#). This seismic shift in positioning has gathered momentum and support for vaccine manufacturing in Africa is growing rapidly. Recent [moves by the EU](#) are indicative of strengthening ties between the “twin continents” and signals of significant support for vaccine delivery and manufacturing capacity on the continent will hasten us off the road of dependency. Health security equals lives saved, economies strengthened and jobs secured. The microbe has shown us that in our interdependent, interconnected world, our economic future depends on our ability to respond collectively to health crises, and to do so in a way that corrects the power imbalances of the past.

[Covid-19](#) has shown that we Africans must move faster towards real self-sufficiency in diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccine production. No one will help us if we do not attempt to help ourselves. It is time to stop feeding off the scraps from the table of high-income countries.

The pandemic is a global humanitarian and economic crisis, [not just a public health crisis](#). It is the defining moment of our time. As in the post-second world war period that gave rise to multilateralism as we know it, Covid-19 is reshaping our world in ways that require a redesign of our systems and changes in how we view our future. It is up to us as Africans to decide if we are to accept mere observer status or be a main player at the table.

Yet we as Africans must also accept responsibility for our share of [the invidious position](#) we are in. In part, it is due to poor governance, massive under-investment in human capital development, wholesale corruption and an over-dependency on external assistance. For too long we have sat back and allowed “do-gooders” to determine our fate. The business model of some donors and western non-governmental organisations is rooted in old-fashioned ways of viewing Africa, with [remnants of colonialism](#) underpinning their decision-making, This is what constitutes the “do-gooder” syndrome.

In this new epoch, we must break free from the shackles of do-gooderism and aid dependency. There is a moment of opportunity in this awful crisis. We must seize it with courage. It is time for us to innovate and build our own institutions, ones that will stand the test of time like [the pyramids of Kush](#).

The time is now. African leadership must do what is necessary in this moment to save lives and preserve livelihoods. The sleeping giant Nigeria must awake and join [South Africa](#) to leverage its geopolitical potential.

We have seen what is possible. Under the leadership of John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, Africa has shown it can rise to the occasion by orchestrating continental management of the pandemic response. Plans are being prepared for the production and manufacturing of vaccines in Senegal, Rwanda and South Africa.

This brings me to the shake-up needed in global systems. Covid-19 has shown that we need more than a mere decolonisation of aid. We need a reimagining and re-engineering of the international architecture, of how we interact as people and as systems.

We will need the sustained political will and true partnership from our multilateral and bilateral partners and a sense of urgency to meet the moment we're in. There are opportunities in this crisis for [Africa's long-term health security](#). These opportunities will be lost, stolen or taken away if we fail to expose the sense of entitlement from some of our do-gooder friends, who seek to undermine or delegitimise the shifting paradigm or who have historically seen us more as charity case than partners. This is an opportunity to address the power imbalance that underpins the unequal availability of vaccines.

Coronavirus is threatening the global status quo. Those who are trying to shore up the old systems would seek in this moment to protect their power base. That cannot be allowed to happen if we are to build a world where public health is seen as a critical element of our future economic security.